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'My two homes': Children's picture books and non/normative imaginaries of home in post-divorce/separation families

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Biographical note

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Abstract:

In spite of a burgeoning interest in children's home lives, we know little about the meaning and experience of home for children living in post-divorce/separation families who often spend time in more than one parental home. As a starting point, in this article I analyse the way in which thirteen 'therapeutic' picture books for younger children aged 3-8 represent home for such children (and their parents) through their text and images. I argue that the books contain four dominant tropes of domestic transition through their representation of the disruption, journeys, thresholds and materialities of home. However, at the same time, the books also present the ordinariness of domestic home life in post-divorce/separation family life with a counter-narrative of the mundane time spent being together and gender-neutral parental care practices at home.

Key words: children, family, heteronormativity, divorce and separation, shared-care arrangements

The domestic space of home is an important everyday site for the 'doing' of family through family practices, yet is frequently taken-for-granted as the backdrop to family life (Morgan 2013). Empirical evidence of the centrality of home in the spatial production of parenting and childhood more specifically is highlighted by research on: domestic space as a site of young children's toys and play (Cieraad 2013b; Hancock and Gillen 2007; Plowman and Stevenson 2013; Stevenson and Prout 2013); the routines, rules and relations of 'family time' spent at home (Christensen et al. 2000; Dowling and Power 2012; Harden et al. 2013; Kyrönlampi-Kylmänen and Määttä 2012; McNamee 1998; Sibley 1995; Wood and Beck 1994); and home as an affective, embodied and sensory space of family relationships (James 2013; Valentine et al. 2012; Wilson et al. 2012). Yet, the diversity of families and consequent variations in children's home lives has not yet been deeply explored in these interdisciplinary literatures. While scholars have thoroughly questioned the heteronormativity of home imaginaries from the perspective of queer theory and the making of LGBTQ homes (e.g. Gorman-Murray 2006; Gorman-Murray and Cook 2018), arguably there is more to be done to diversify understandings of children's home lives and how they are lived in relation to heteronormative family structures.

Based on their extensive empirical research carried out in the 1990s, Smart et al (2001) highlighted the changing experience of childhood and argued that the reconfiguration of everyday family life post-separation/divorce was affecting increasing numbers of parents and children in the UK. The most recent statistics available for the UK show that by 2012 approximately one quarter of all families with dependent children were headed by a lone-parent - that is, nearly 2 million families and 3.1 million children (ONS 2012). A report by Peacey and Hunt (2008) for UK single parent support and advocacy group *Gingerbread*, suggested that nine per cent of single parent families in the UK had adopted 'shared care'

arrangements for their children, so that they lived at least one third of their time with each parent. 'Shared care' arrangements may consist of at least three nights of each week or an alternative, but almost equal, pattern, such as one week with each parent in turn (Peacey and Hunt 2008). *In addition*, while not all of the children in lone-parent families will have experienced separation/divorce or have non-resident parents engaging with their care, in their report Peacey and Hunt (2008) reveal that *a further* 55% of children who have some contact with non-resident parents have an overnight stay with that parent *at least once a week* and many have additional overnight stays during holiday periods. Such children are counted as living in 'lone-parent' households¹, yet the realities of their everyday home lives are characterised by regular moves between their parents' residences. Since their study, 'shared care' arrangements, including shared residential custody, are becoming more prevalent in the UK, as well as in the US, Australia, the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden (Nielsen 2011; Smyth 2009; Spruijt and Duindam 2010). The experience of living in two homes, whether as a result of parental separation/divorce or other co-parenting arrangements between adults, might therefore now be understood as a rather *ordinary* part of childhood (Smart 2004). Yet such experiences of home are almost entirely ignored by contemporary interdisciplinary literatures on home.

In spite of the urgency of such an endeavour, in this article, I do not set out to directly examine parents and children's perspectives on the multi-local home lives associated with post-separation/divorce family life. Instead, my more modest aim is to explore and critically reflect upon the messages about home being communicated to children living in post-divorce/separation families through an analysis of thirteen 'therapeutic' picture books explicitly designed to help them understand and conceptualise this experience. By 'therapeutic', I mean that these are nonfiction picture books, that would be identified perhaps as 'bibliotherapy' in their aim to promote good emotional health and self-understanding (Kramer and Smith 1998, 90), and are produced 'solely for the purpose of teaching them [children] adaptive strategies or coping mechanisms... useful for providing a vocabulary and relevant scenarios' (Mo 2007, 25). I examine these books through a textual and visual methodology, to consider both the explicit and implicit messages about home they present. Emilie Cameron (2012) has recently written about the place of story and storytelling in geographical knowledge. Informed by the wider debates she reviews at length, I approach these stories as sites through which meaning is created in the text and visuals. The stories are, therefore, interpreted as adult attempts to shape children's imaginations of home in particular ways, not as accounts of the way home simply 'is'.

I turn first to provide some further analytical reflections as background to the research, encompassing discussion of the meaning of home in children's books, existing studies of post-divorce/separation childhoods, and the picture books in the sample. In the two main sections of the article that follow, I first explore the four dominant tropes of domestic transition from parental separation that emerge from the books: firstly, the disruption of home lives; secondly, the journeying between parental homes; thirdly, the arrival and departure scenes at

the thresholds of parental homes; and, fourthly, the packing and unpacking of belongings to carry between homes and make each residence more homely. In the second main part of the analysis, I consider the significance of everyday family time spent at home, including how domestic practices such as caring, eating together and playing, are central not only to living in two homes, but to the making of two places of residence into two homes. I consider how the books represent the changing routines and emotions of family life when it is played out, at least for the children, across two domestic sites that must be made homely. These findings resonate with existing studies of the meaning of home in children's lives suggesting that, in spite of the domestic transitions revealed by these books, there is also much that is ordinary about homemaking in post-divorce/separation family life.

Researching transformations in families 'at home'

Since children's literature is largely written and published by adults, it is widely accepted to reflect adult constructions of childhood and to be shaped by their hopes and fears about this life stage at a particular time (Wilson and Short 2012). Stott and Francis (1993, 223) revealed how *modern* stories for children shared a moral concern with the main character's relation to 'home' and 'not home', with home being 'a place of comfort, security, and acceptance – a place which meets both physical and emotional needs'. Writing almost twenty years later, Wilson and Short (2012) identify a shift in *postmodern* children's literature to plots in which this traditional motif - of a journey away from home and back again to safety - has been recast. Instead: 'the child protagonist constructs a new home because of an absence of home at the beginning or because the home in untenable... children in these stories can't go home again because their home isn't where they want to dwell. Home isn't a place of refuge or comfort' (ibid. 134). In a postmodern plot, they claim, children are abandoned by messy complicated adults who fail to give children a proper home and children end up acting in non-childlike ways to save the adults around them. This wider shift of the representation of home in children's literature would, for many researchers, resonate automatically with their understanding of the circumstances of children living in post-separation/divorce families, as well as the picture books produced for such children. For example, in an existing study of picture books on divorce, Mo (2007, 23) summarises her findings as follows: 'Young children are vulnerable to the nightmarish anxiety and confusion inflicted by divorce... Fortunately, picture books provide a powerful venue for therapeutic interventions for young children with the pathological experience.' This quote is revealing of Mo's (2007) broader understanding of 'divorce culture', in which she considers parental dissolution as inherently productive of instability and limiting of children's development. However, I came across these books while searching for resources about how to help my own son make sense of our changing domestic lives, a positionality which, alongside my academic commitment to exploring critical geographies of intimacy (Walsh 2018), makes me question a heteronormative hierarchy of idealised home imaginaries.

Mo's (2007) perspective certainly fits with much of the work produced in the social sciences on shared parenting because, for ease of recruitment, many academic studies have focused on the 10-15% of divorced parents who are high-conflict couples (verbally and often physically aggressive, threatening and abusive) and whose parenting arrangements are, consequently, negotiated through family courts (Nielsen 2011). One such study in Australia conducted by McIntosh et al (2010) itself concluded that other variables, including the high-conflict of the parents, were more likely to be responsible for the children's relatively high anxiety levels than the shared care of the children, yet has been frequently cited as evidence of the harm that such living arrangements will do. In contrast, the landmark empirical studies of Carol Smart and Bren Neale (e.g. Neale et al 1998; Smart and Neale 1999; Smart et al 2001), carried out with both children and parents, have established a more nuanced understanding of post-separation/divorce family life in the UK. Their research with older children and young adults does not gloss over the challenges parental separation can bring to everyday home lives and reveals the mixed experiences of such children, even among siblings. Importantly, however, they position their work as exploring 'perfectly ordinary childhoods' (Smart et al 2001, 83) and establish the children they interviewed as themselves resilient, reflexive, active 'doers' of family life. Smart et al's (2001) more neutral approach to cross-household parenting comes in part from their decision to sample a broader range of families rather than the high-conflict couples mentioned above. However, their studies mainly focused on older children so that the impact of post-divorce/separation cross-household parenting arrangements on younger children's understanding and experience of home is less well understood. Furthermore, academic literature on post-separation/divorce families does not usually discuss home directly, focusing more often on family structure. Only rare glimpses of home materialities appear, for instance Kyrönlampi-Kylmänen and Määttä (2012, p. 75) note, the 'concrete location of a home can change, the size of a home can get smaller', but they quickly move on to a brief discussion of the impact of stepfamilies specifically. In this article, in the absence of existing qualitative work, I put forward an analysis of these picture books as a starting point from which to develop our understanding of children's non-normative, yet ordinary, home lives.

The sample of thirteen picture books discussed in this article is purposefully limited to those introducing and normalising the idea of having two homes resulting from parental separation/divorce. As such, the remit of the article does not encompass picture books that instead take blended families as their starting point (e.g. living with stepparents, stepsiblings and/or half-siblings). Nor are any books included which aim to discuss childhood within LGBTQ homes, since such families often plan and anticipate co-parenting arrangements across multiple homes before birth. Clearly these would also be examples of picture books that call into question heteronormative depictions of children's home lives, but they are not considered here. Though not stated explicitly on their cover descriptions, the picture books in the sample are broadly appropriate for children of 3-8 years, to be looked at independently and with parents or other adults, depending on the reading ability of the child. The titles of these books would typically be discovered easily by a parent consulting a librarian, searching an online bookstore, or in the online discussion forums of single parent advocacy and

support groups such as Gingerbread. Many of these books have been translated into numerous languages and marketed globally. The perceived importance of this literature is suggested, therefore, by both the number of titles available and their geographical reach. Using the Amazon Best Seller Rankings from the UK site and the TCK Publishing website, it is possible to estimate that customers are purchasing, from this book seller alone, thirty seven copies per day of *Two Homes* (Masurel 2002); nineteen copies a day of *Mum and Dad Glue* (Gray 2010); nine copies of *Living with Mum, Living with Dad* (Walsh 2012); eight copies of *Two Nests* (Anholt and Coplestone 2013) and *Dinosaurs Divorce* (Brown and Brown 1988); six copies of *It's Not Your Fault KoKo Bear* (Lansky 1998) and five of *Mom and Dad Don't Live Together Anymore* (Stinson 2010). There are a further six titles included in the sample which have much lower sales figures of 1-2 per day or fewer, but taken together and over a year, this is still significant. These titles, some available only as used copies, are: *Two of Everything* (Cole 2000), *Was it the Chocolate Pudding?* (Levins 2006), *Jack* (Bishop and Murray 2012), *Every Second Friday Fun with Dad* (Lightfoot and Galbraith 2009), *At Daddy's On Saturdays* (Girard 1987) or *A Day with Dad* (Holmberg 2008). As can be perceived from their titles, some of the books are aimed primarily at introducing the idea of parents living apart or children living in two homes (e.g. *Two Homes*), whereas others have some discussion of this in the context of focusing more broadly on parents divorcing or separating (e.g. *Mum and Dad Glue*).

Mobile children in adults' home imaginaries: tropes of transition

Schier and Proske (2010, 18) note that the logistical and emotional demands of children's everyday routines that arise from their multilocal lives and spatially separated families have not been fully appreciated by researchers. They argue that theirs is an everyday life punctuated by frequent arrivals and departures that are *disruptive* of everyday domestic life: 'a daily routine of regularly packing the suitcase, leaving beloved things behind, thinking carefully so as not to forget anything that one needs at the other place, being excited. On top of this, the trip can be strenuous and demands time; time that is missing for playing or being with friends'. Their analysis chimes with the tropes of transition evident in the picture books aimed at younger children navigating post-divorce/separation family life. In this section, I will discuss four dominant motifs in the visual and textual construction of the stories of children's home mobilities presented in these picture books: firstly, the theme of domestic disruption; secondly, the significance of the journeys themselves; thirdly, the thresholds of parental residences as points of arrival/departure; and, fourthly, the transitional objects that children carry with them between households.

Firstly, the theme of domestic disruption is only tackled directly by a couple of books within the sample, but stands out for its emotional resonance. The second most popular book, *Mum and Dad Glue* (Gray 2009), is exceptional in adopting the wider public discourse of 'broken families' through which divorce is persistently figured in Britain. Wilkinson (2013) argues that gay parents have seen an increasing acceptance within UK state discourse that promotes marriage and long-term coupledness as the basis of family, while lone-parent households, in

contrast, have been figured as 'broken' families that are a moral threat to community and nation. In *Mum and Dad Glue* (Gray 2009), the young male narrator talks about their mum and dad being broken and sets out to find some glue to fix them back together, but the brokenness extends to his home. The pictures show, in succession, his house from the outside, his parents' double bed, and then the sofa in the living room, with each image having an enormous white zigzag crack from top to bottom. Only once the narrator realises 'I need to see that families can live apart instead' and 'My parents may be broken but their love for me is not', do the cracks disappear from the imagery. *It's Not Your Fault, KoKo Bear* (Lansky 1998) is also unusual among the sample because KoKo Bear is told about his parents' separation within the story itself rather than this being an event that has already taken place. KoKo starts off sitting with both his parents in the living room of his family home and MaMa Bear explains that they are divorcing which: 'means that now you will have two homes instead of one. PaPa and I each will have a home of our own and you will spend time in both of them. We will both still take care of you, but MaMa and PaPa Bear will live apart.' In contrast to nearly all the other books, KoKo Bear directly articulates his feelings - 'I want PaPa Bear to live here. I don't want him to leave. I don't want two homes!' - and the text and images are saturated with a range of negative emotions: confusion, sadness, anger, fear, and shame. Nonetheless, KoKo Bear is presented as a resilient character, happily negotiating two homes by the end of the story.

The second motif emerging strongly from the books, this time significant in terms of frequency, is that of the journey itself. In *Two Nests* (Anholt and Coplestone 2013), Paul and Betty are birds living in a snug nest in a cherry tree when Baby Bird is born and, rather worryingly, the nest becomes too small: 'there wasn't room to fit them all.' The birds get grumpy and squabble until they decide to build another nest for father bird Paul. Baby bird misses his father until he himself learns to fly and can travel back and forth: 'At last that baby found what's best, flying back and forth from nest to nest'. The more factual *Mom and Dad Don't Live Together Anymore* (Stinson and Oelofsen 2010) pictures a happy scene of everyone singing in the car as Dad drives the siblings away from the city to his house in the country. However, perhaps the most evocative image of the physical journey between homes is that which features in *Two of Everything* (Cole 2001). While this book has a smaller readership, there is something rather insightful in its portrayal of children traveling underground between homes 'one to suit each parent...connected by a secret tunnel only big enough for Demetrius and Paula.' This out-of-sight travel speaks perhaps to the relatively invisible mobilities of increasing numbers of children walking and taking the bus between homes or even commuting long-distances by train and plane (Haugen 2010; Jenson 2009). In the UK, a recent BBC Radio 4 documentary 'The Sunday Night Drop' (Colman 2015) also focused on children whose parents drive them long distances and meet in motorway service stations for the children to swap cars.

The third dominant trope is that of the thresholds of the homes as key sites of departure and arrival for the characters in many of the books. The images normalise a physical and emotional distance between the parents located in their separate homes, further emphasising the journeying motif discussed above. The children move from one residence to another seemingly without any

communication between the parents: no greetings or exchange of news occurs. For example, in *Mom and Dad Don't Live Together Anymore* (Stinson and Oelofsen 2010), the father comes to collect siblings and greets them on the steps of the apartment block, rather than at the front door of the apartment itself. However, it is the mother experiencing the event in negative terms: she is pictured turning away, eyes closed, while the children wave and smile, leaping down the steps to see their father. Similarly, *It's Not Your Fault, KoKo Bear* (Lansky 1998) has an image in which MaMa Bear is standing inside her home and PaPa Bear is in his car, while KoKo Bear is on the pathway to his front door, turned towards his father smiling as he says goodbye. In *Dinosaurs Divorce* (Brown and Brown 1998), the dinosaur sibling characters are shown arriving alone at the front door to visit their father and ringing the doorbell; and *Every Second Friday* (Lightfoot and Galbraith 2008) explains '...after our mum has waved us goodbye, we make our way into Dad's house...once we've squeezed our way inside we call out to Dad and then he'll pop up behind a piano, a bookshelf or a car engine'. In all these stories then, the child must make the transition alone: the parents do not speak to each other or enter each other's homes. This may be intended to emphasise the message that it is only the child who must live in two domestic sites, but the children are happy in these pictures and, since it is consistently framed as leaving their mother's home to transition to that of their father, emotion is evoked just as much perhaps for the mothers saying goodbye. It is important to remember, therefore, that this imagination of home departures and arrivals, like all the dominant tropes, results from an adult imaginary, and this one seems informed by stereotypes of high-conflict couples. Significantly, the children are not given any agency to invite their non-resident parent to cross the threshold with them.

The fourth dominant trope, one that features consistently across all the stories, is one of home materialities: the packing and unpacking of moving between homes. In a broader interdisciplinary literature on home, the material culture of domesticity is understood to be enormously significant in the practice, meaning and articulation of home cultures (e.g. Miller 2001). For children, we might assume, their attachment to personal possessions, including mass-produced toys, holds a similar function and many of the books have images of packing or unpacking suitcases. In *Mom and Dad Don't Live Together Anymore* (Stinson and Oelofsen 2010) the opening text on the first page reads 'My mommy and daddy don't live together anymore', but it is the picture that is designed to evoke the meaning of this logistically and emotionally. The image is of the young narrator flinging out a jumper from her green suitcase, perhaps unpacking or hurriedly searching for something she needs. A book and colouring crayons lie on the bed next to the suitcase and a stuffed animal is on top of the clothes still inside. The little girl has a sad expression in the middle of this scene which echoes the narratives of domestic disruption discussed earlier. For *Jack too* (Bishop and Murray 2012), his articulation of why it is difficult to share time between two houses focuses on forgetting things he needs for school or forgetting where he's left things. The image that accompanies this is of two road signs pointing in opposite directions, with 'Mummy's House' clearly written on one sign and 'Daddy's House' on the other. His wise Black Cat solves this with the guidance: 'Mummy and Daddy will help you remember the things you have to take from

one home to another...You can take familiar items from one home to the other... like your favourite patchwork quilt'. Articulating this parent responsibility for the un/packing is rare among the sample. Some books identify a particular object that travels between homes. For example, in *It's Not Your Fault, KoKo Bear* (Lansky 1998) a rag doll accompanies KoKo throughout much of the book: it appears draped over his arm as KoKo watches from the window as his father packs belongings into the car; he is cuddling it while being tucked up on the sofa-bed at his father's new house; and it is under the kitchen table or over the sofa arm while he and his mother spend time together. He also acquires a blue and yellow bag to move between homes: we see it nearby in both homes and carried, along with the rag doll, as KoKo goes to meet his father in the car while his mother watches from the front door. The repetition of this refrain across the books suggests that for children who regularly journey between parental homes, the materialities of domesticity – the stuff that children carry between homes – are a significant part of their negotiation of home.

Successful shared residence and shared care arrangements from the perspective of older children tend to involve flexibility and respect for children's choices (Haugen 2010; Smart 2004). The dominant tropes of these picture books – their focus on the disruptions, journeys, thresholds, and un/packing of home – is not accidental and seems to resonate with academic understanding of older children's experiences. However, a much deeper understanding of the spatialities and emotional geographies of younger children's everyday home lives is urgently needed if we are to move beyond adult stereotypes of post-divorce/separation family life. In Gram-Hanssen and Bech-Danielsen's (2008, 519) research with adults post-divorce/separation, the material dissolution and reconstitution of home that occurred is acknowledged to be both entirely usual (given that 40% of marriages end in separation and divorce in Denmark where they are conducting their research) and yet also an emotional crisis: 'it is about a total change in everyday life and identity, and the housing situation plays an important role in this.' That one adult is usually hopeful of creating a better home, whether in terms of a reduction of conflict, an increase in their agency, or a recoupling, reminds us that *home dissolution is a necessary part of the anticipation of future homes* (Brickell 2014; Thompson 2007). As Baxter and Brickell (2014, 135) note, home unmaking often demarks and enables the beginning of a new phase of home making. It is necessary then not to either understand children's post-divorce/separation home lives against some romanticised image of their previous homes (or indeed against the homes of those still living with both parents), for these homes may also be experienced as difficult places to live for both adults and children. At the same time, it is also important to consider the ways in which children's home lives continue in normative, ordinary and more hopeful ways post-divorce/separation. The next section discusses these parallel messages about the meaning of 'doing family' in non-normative households.

'Doing' family at home: time, care and emotion

In this section, I explore how the picture books represent the 'doing' of post-divorce/separation family life at home through their images and text highlighting the dominant themes of time, care and love as being inseparable in the domestic 'doing' of family life in post-divorce/separation families (as in others). Smart (2004, 402) argues that 'the way in which people think about "how to divorce" and "how to live family life after divorce" are being transformed and that this change is happening at both a cultural level, and also within personal relationships' with a consequent impact upon family practices. 'Shared care' residential patterns of the 'almost-equal' sort described earlier (see Peacey and Hunt 2008), are not in evidence across all the picture books and a range of patterns of residence are instead depicted, mostly ambiguous and unexplained. Yet the most popular book on sale with over fifty sold on Amazon daily, is *Two Homes* (Masarel 2002) where the effort to present the equality of both parents' residences as homes for the child narrator Alex is consistent throughout. The description is in very simple sentences for younger children with theme of particular pages using a repetitive refrain: 'I have *two* front doors... I have *two* rooms... I have *two* favourite chairs... I have *two* kitchens... I have *two* bathrooms... And I have *two* telephone numbers.' The book avoids all four evocative motifs described in the last section: Alex doesn't experience domestic disruption at the beginning of the book since his parents simply live apart and he avoids the un/packing by having toys and a toothbrush at each home. He is pictured spending time with each parent, engaged in cooking, play, and daily routines of domestic life. Furthermore, the continuity in his relationship with each parent while Alex is away at the others' residence is emphasised through the pictures of him using the phone to talk to them and the final message: 'We love you wherever we are.' This is a representation of intimacy in family life that resonates more with the flexibility in co-presence of transnational families, a feature that makes the multiplicity of home possible. By avoiding the more messy or difficult parts of living in two homes, the book achieves a wholly positive message for readers.

Living with mum and living with dad. My two homes (Walsh, M. 2013) echoes this equality, but is exceptional within the sample because the author is careful to phrase it such that the little girl narrating it lays claim to both residences as *her* homes rather than those of her parents: 'So sometimes I live here, with my mum and cat in *our* house with the pink door... and sometimes I live with my dad, in *our* flat, right at the top!' (*emphasis added*). She has a bedroom and toys at each home. Shared residence and a dual-site home life is again normalised right from the beginning of the story, with no explanation deemed necessary. In this story, home with mum is in a house, while home with dad is in a flat, but it is not clear whether the house is a new home or whether the child previously lived in this house with both parents (in fact the story is left open, such that we do not know whether they ever lived all together). In this story, both parents have enough space and resources for the little girl to have her own room, with separate toys, and decorated differently the way she has chosen, but this cannot always be provided by parents (see Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar 2017). The materialities of the homes are presented as different but equal: 'My mum and dad both know I

don't like going to sleep in the dark. So at my mum's I have a panda night light ... and at my dad's I have pretty butterfly lights'. By focusing on this example of a seemingly trivial decoration, the author notes both the significance and the entanglement of domestic material culture, the home as an everyday site of care practices, and our emotional experiences of belonging.

In *Mom and Dad Don't Live Together Anymore* (Stinson and Oelofsen 2010), the story also starts with the family living apart, the little girl declaring 'My mommy and daddy don't live together anymore.' The girl narrator lives with her mother and brother 'in an apartment in the city' during the routinized school week and goes 'to Daddy's house in the country on weekends' by car. In spite of this disparity, she explains it neutrally and equally in terms of belonging: 'I like it at Mommy's apartment. I like riding the elevators. I like dropping garbage down the chute. I like it at Daddy's house too. I like feeding the horses at the farm down the road. I like playing with my old friends.' However, the images are intriguingly gendered: we are shown one image of the children baking and another of them decorating the Christmas tree in Mommy's apartment, while Daddy 'takes me to Nana's for dinner' accompanies an image of the children being served spaghetti by their grandmother. In another image the father is shown reading a night-time story in bed, but he is looking towards his new partner bringing him a cup of tea and clutching her dressing gown as though it is about to gape open, with the text revealing the daughters' confusion and possibly (given her expression) anxiety: 'I wonder if Daddy wants to get married with Paula'. The next image shows the girl awake in the night at her mother's home sharing her concerns about divorce with her mother.

Was it the Chocolate Pudding? (Levins and Langdo 2006), also presents a primary home for the children but, in contrast, the father is the resident-parent while the boy visits his mother every other Saturday and 'stays over' with his younger brother. This narrator fears the divorce is his fault because his mother moves out following an argument with his father over the mess he and his brother have made with chocolate pudding. Yet, this picture book still provides more detail of everyday mundane domestic activities with both parents: the children are shown at their mum's house in pyjamas making a pretend tent in the living room, being served pancakes for breakfast, and singing together, as well as at their dad's house being tucked into bed, playing with blocks, and being served dinner. The message that the parents still love their children in spite of living apart is linked in the text to the evidence of their caring practices and involvement in these everyday activities at home: 'He always makes sure we are cozy and warm and safe. My dad loves my brother and me'; 'Mommy sings to us every day [...] Mommy loves my brother and me'. In this sense then, in spite of the limited time spent with their mother in comparison with their father, the author presents a very equal significance in terms of providing domestic routine, safety, and love.

In contrast, *At Daddy's on Saturdays* (Girard 1987), *A Day with Dad* (Holmberg 2008), and *Every Second Friday Fun with Dad* (Lightfoot and Galbraith 2009) are three of the sample of picture books about post-divorce/separation family life with the lowest sales figures and, as the titles suggest, their stories reveal more traditional visitation patterns in their stories. *At Daddy's on Saturdays* (Girard

1987) explicitly states that the protagonist, Katie, will continue to have only one home: 'Mommy explained: "You'll just be visiting, though," she said, "because your home is with me." Yet, even this book, published over thirty years ago, contradicts this message with one about two homes if we explore how the plot, visuals and narration develop in the story to establish the father's residence as increasingly homely. Katie helps with furnishing arrangements and she and her father learn to cook together, leading to the narrator to comment: 'The more she visited Daddy, the more his house did seem like a home... Sometimes her visits were even a little boring, just like being with Daddy on a regular old day at home'. *Every second Friday Fun with Dad* (Lightfoot and Galbraith 2009), reveals the continuation of such patterns of residence as a popular narrative two decades later: the two siblings visit their father fortnightly and enjoy pretending to be pirates, having parties and dancing with him. The story finishes though with a picture of mundane domesticity - dad washing up the dishes in front of a fridge covered in their drawings and photos - and the message that this is 'how we know our Dad's house is our house too!' The book *A Day with Dad* (Holmberg 2008) should perhaps be removed from the sample, given that the story takes place entirely outside the domestic home space and, therefore, seems to present an out-dated view of fathering roles in post-divorce/separation families. Yet, though a book no longer in print and bought in smaller quantities, it is important to note that this pattern may again increase as the un-chosen norm for any children whose non-resident parent claims housing welfare in the UK. These parents may be affected by the changed age-threshold for the Shared Accommodation Rate and, as Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar (2017, 341) argue: 'Living in a single room in a shared house with strangers is unlikely to provide a safe and welcoming home for a child to visit.' Little attention has been paid to housing inequalities in the literature on post-divorce/separation family life, but Anthony (1997) notes the relative affluence of many children's father's homes in comparison with their mothers in the US, while more recently Gram-Hanssen and Bech-Danielsen (2008) also found that among divorcing couples in Denmark, men are much more likely than woman to stay in the matrimonial home if it is owner-occupied, with explanations including that they had paid more of the mortgage, invested more time and effort in maintenance, or owned it prior to marriage.

Across nearly all the books, *both* parents' residences are consistently represented as being or becoming homely for their children through the time spent with their parent in their domestic space. Time at home is considered to have an 'ordinariness and non-eventful quality' for children, such that they 'struggle' to identify exactly how they spend their time at home because: 'family time at home simply *is*' (Christensen et al 2000, 146). Indeed, the significance to both parents and children of spending time together in the home is made evident by Harden et al's (2013) study of the impact of working parenthood on the everyday lives of children of primary school age. Having gathered both children's and parent's perspectives on the impact of working parenthood, they suggest that 'home is viewed as a 'special' location in childhood, especially as a site of significant parent-child interaction and 'the place that seems to hold meaning as the backdrop to family life' (page 308). For younger children simply playing at home is understood to enable children to *inhabit* domestic space and gain

belonging through an *embodied* sense of familiarity, especially through play (Kyrönlampi-Kylmänen and Määttä 2012). The way in which routines of bedtime, play and meals together, as well as practices of reading and talking with parents, are the dominant images in picture books of post-divorce/separation homes highlights the on-going ordinariness and significance of everyday domesticity in the rhythms of family life through which children's homes are understood to be made.

The findings of studies with children living in heteronormative 'family homes' resonate with an idea currently shaping both academic enquiry into post-divorce/separation family life (e.g. Nielson 2011) and the picture books examined here: namely, if both parents continue to be involved in parenting, children benefit from *living with*, rather than *visiting*, their non-resident parent, precisely to experience the everyday togetherness this facilitates, including the ordinariness and significance of time spent at home. While an on-going close relationship with mothers is often assumed by these literatures, co-parenting is celebrated. Indeed, Nielsen (2011) finds a strong rationale for shared residential parenting, rather than weekend only or weekday visits, because it promotes 'high-quality fathering time' by providing opportunities for the experience of everyday life at home:

'These ordinary routines are rituals include cooking together, running errands, getting ready for school, working together on homework, shopping, doing chores, and being together in spontaneous, unstructured ways' (Nielsen 2011, 590).

Shared parenting, Nielsen argues, is more likely to occur when both parents 'believe it is important for the father to remain actively and fully involved in the children's daily lives' but, crucially, also requires parents whose combined incomes are high enough to support two households suitable for children and, at the same time, have flexible, child-friendly work schedules.

Questioning normative home cultures, finding ordinary home lives

The importance of stories in our understanding of home is not frequently highlighted in the social sciences, but they are an important element in the production of home imaginaries. Informed by wider debates on critical approaches to the analysis of stories (see Cameron 2012), I have explored 13 picture books for younger children aged 3-8 that introduce the idea of parents living apart. The focus was on 'therapeutic' stories (Mo 2007) written and illustrated primarily to help children understand and make sense of their changing domestic lives. These stories are sites through which the meaning of home is created in both the text and visuals by their authors and illustrators (Cameron 2012). They must, therefore, be interpreted as adult attempts to shape children's imaginations of home in particular ways, not as accounts of the way home simply 'is'. From examining the books, it is possible to observe two parallel messages about home. The first is about the domestic transitions that emerge for children involved in divorce and separation, a theme represented through tropes

of the disruption of home, the journeying back and forth of mobile children between parental homes, the repeated arrivals and departures on home thresholds, and the un/packing of belongings to carry with them. At the same time, the picture books present a message about the continuity of home-making practices, through time spent together in domestic space, the ongoing domestic care practices of both parents, and the love that is demonstrated through the reproduction of family life in two homes. Taken together, these books both question normative home cultures and present rather ordinary home lives.

It is important to come to questions of post-divorce/separation family life and the consequent changes in the meaning of home through the adoption of *critical* perspectives on intimacy and home. On the one hand, we must resist the romanticisation of heteronormative homes and remember that living with two biological parents who are married does not always make for a stable and conflict-free home life. We must remember too that, aside from the intimacy of their parents, there are other pressures on contemporary children's home lives that impact on whether home is a positive and safe place. In the UK, state policies of austerity and citizenship, as well as cultures of work, gender and parenting, influence the meaning and experience of home for children, irrespective of whether their parents live together or apart. On the other hand, we also need to understand more fully the emotional and practical dimensions of living in two homes and listen to children's perspectives of the domestic transitions that divorce and separation bring with them in order to better support them in their changing family lives. David Sibley (1995, 130) suggests that, in order to understand how children experience their homes, we need to be attentive to 'the way power is expressed in family interactions and played out in the spaces of the home'. Existing scholarship tells us that children's experiences may include parental control over their use of space and time, frustration with a lack of privacy, conflict with siblings, anxieties about familial relations, and a sense of being monitored for their behaviours and the extent to which they follow home-rules (see Sibley 1995, but also empirical work: McNamee 1998; Wood and Beck 1995). For children in post-separation/divorce families who may live in two homes, with variation in regularity or frequency, there may be two sets of materialities, routines, rules, parenting styles, sibling groups, and locations to negotiate. We know that such children are generally resilient, benefit from sustaining relationships with both parents, and choose to spend time in both homes (Smart et al 2004), but we understand little of their experience and the way in which it shapes their everyday lives.

In this article, as a starting point and in the absence of qualitative research direct with parents and children themselves, I have explored how post-divorce/separation home lives, and especially the experience of living in two homes, is represented to young children through 'therapeutic' (Mo 2007) picture books. It is urgent, however, to hear more from such non-normative (yet ordinary) families themselves. Gathering the accounts of both parents and children in post-separation/divorce families will be an important part of a broader challenge facing studies of home cultures: namely, giving voice to a diversity of children's experiences of home to challenge the idealised home imaginaries that currently provide us with a hierarchy of family forms and

practices. The article raises a number of unanswered questions about the books and stories themselves, for example: How do parents and children select, read, and talk about these books? Are they read as part of particular routines, by particular parents, in particular spaces of the home, during particular phases of post-separation/divorce, or do they have a wider reach? How are the stories co-produced in encounters between the child and the book, mediated by the parent? Do the concepts, stories and characters introduced in these books travel beyond them into the everyday talk in both homes?

However, the article also raises deeper and more challenging questions about the dominant ideologies of home and the diversity of children's home lives that will need to be examined through in-depth qualitative studies. Baxter and Brickell (2014) argue that the idealisation of home has begun to be challenged by geographical work, but it remains the case that instances of 'home unmaking' are often understood as exceptionalities, implicitly understood in contrast to a 'normal' domesticity that remains romanticised. Arguably, this is even stronger in relation to children and home, perhaps because of the persistence of nostalgic imaginations of childhood and home (Sibley 1995). I would argue, therefore, that it is imperative to deepen our understanding of the diversity of children's home lives by encompassing a broader range of children with respect to housing situations and family type. These picture books demonstrate the way in which home unmaking and home making are connected processes, such that 'unmaking can also work symbiotically with the recovery or remaking of home too' (Baxter and Brickell 2014, 135). A focus on the home lives of children in post-divorce/separation families can help to redress the way in which their stories of home un/re-making are made invisible by both their age and their residence in lone-parent or blended families. Queer analysis of LGBT home-making (e.g. Gorman-Murray 2006) has firmly unsettled the taken-for-granted heterosexuality of home, but there is more to be done to dismantle the dominance of heteronormative models of home in both popular culture and critical scholarship.

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¹ This might also have the effect of obscuring fathering, but this is beyond the remit of this article. For research on post-divorce/post-separation fathering, see: Philip 2013, 2014.